

POPULATING THE POORHOUSE:
A REASSESSMENT OF POOR
RELIEF IN THE ANTEBELLUM
DELAWARE VALLEY

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*I*f we were to believe the Trustees of the Poor of Chester County, Pennsylvania in 1826, the mingling of the sexes in the poorhouse main residential building resulted in numerous inmate pregnancies.¹ The quarterly report of the Visitors' committee held up before the taxpaying public the specter of a dependent population which "altho its members are daily diminishing in number by death" or departures, had become "a very monster which. . . possesses the power of procreating and reanimating itself."² The population upon which the Trustees' anxiety centered at the time numbered 161 individuals (another 107 were "partially supported" through outdoor relief, but they would not become the focus of especial concern until the following year). The Trustees based their luridly-phrased concern on an assumption that the number of poor people in the house had increased since 1822, and an assertion based on "researches" that eight of the twenty children born in the house in the past year had been conceived there. The institution's annual reports to the Court of Quarter Sessions

for these years tell a different story, however. In fact, the population in the house had remained about the same, as had the number of people assisted in the course of each year.³

Fifteen years later, in February 1841, the Chester County Visitors' report asserted that at the time, a large proportion of the current inmate population was "advanced in life, and incapable from this cause of furnishing any considerable amount of labor."⁴ Yet the admission and discharge logs for the year 1840 describe a population of which 75 percent was 48 years old or younger.⁵

When we examine these numbers in broader context, a more complex picture of relief recipients emerges. Images of the poor as monsters (intemperate, promiscuous, lazy) on the one hand, and as members of the community (physically or mentally incapacitated, helpless, unfortunate) on the other, did not appear at different times in different places. Rather, these conflicting images of the poor jostled one another in the arena of public opinion, and administrators played these images off against one another in both public discussion of institutions' management and institutions' published reports. The institutions' inmates at any given time provided ample material for both positive and negative images of the institutionalized poor. For example, Chester County's poorhouse in 1826 sheltered both Daniel O'Daniel, a 72-year-old man in poor health and with only one arm, and 26-year-old Ann Bradley, whose career included at least six admissions to the institution. Ann arrived at the poorhouse as a single mother, met her husband Daniel (a long-term inmate described as "crippled") there, and bore four more children over a fourteen-year period.⁶

Administrators used practical judgements about residency and judgements about the moral character of individual relief applicants in assessing applicants' entitlement to public relief. But administrators were also deeply concerned with the larger issue of the moral character of the poor, and connected to a larger public discussion in America about the effect of relief on the character of recipients. Much of the discussion of poor relief throughout the country revolved around the problem of separating the "undeserving" poor from the "deserving" poor.⁷ Both visions of the poor were powerful in influencing public moral and financial support for the Philadelphia region's poorhouses, where the county-based system of poor relief was relatively new and had not been adopted with undiluted enthusiasm.⁸

This essay has two aims: first, to establish a demographic profile for the institutionalized poor of the Delaware Valley in a period of critical upheaval and change; and, second, to outline the basic relationships between

administrators and paupers that most directly shaped the applicants' experience of social welfare. I have employed statistical analysis of demographic characteristics of 2,509 paupers admitted to the poorhouses of Philadelphia's satellite counties to provide a regional profile of the institutionalized poor, using the records which were both most detailed and specifically not intended for public reading: the daily admission and discharge records, rather than the printed reports or quarterly summaries. The analysis utilizes admission and discharge records from six institutions in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware that exhibit considerable variation in physical size and in average size of inmate population.⁹ The demographic profile of the institutionalized poor resulting from this regional quantitative analysis counters arguments made about the poor by contemporary commentators and some later historians, by showing that the new institutions primarily served their intended population, rather than supporting a growing class of demoralized and permanently dependent poor. The non-urban poor of Philadelphia's outlying counties in the early nineteenth century, like the urban poor of the period, were only periodically dependent on poor relief as part of a larger web of survival strategies.

This essay also uses a combination of statistical and qualitative evidence to address a series of questions about the paupers themselves and about inmates' interactions with administrators. Did the demographic characteristics of the inmate population change fundamentally between 1800 and 1860? Did the satellite counties, like urban areas, develop a harsher attitude toward the poor as the nineteenth century advanced, or were the non-urban poor generally considered full (though unfortunate) members of the community entitled to aid from those more fortunate? A community-centered, regional approach including qualitative evidence reveals paupers actively participating in shaping relief administration, and administrators making decisions on a case-by-case basis regardless of official prescription.¹⁰

The two best-known models for explaining the relationships between social welfare administrators and the poor have proven increasingly unsatisfactory in recent years because they have been too much shaped by theories that oversimplify issues of social, economic, and authority relations. The first posits that the social bonds of rural communities broke down under economic and social change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the result that the poor were increasingly strangers with no stake in the social order, and that relief policy was increasingly harsh in response. The second model, the social control thesis, focuses on relief administration as one of a

range of tools employed by the new and growing middle class to control the poor and shape their values.¹¹ Recent studies have shown that communities in fact did not break down in the course of industrialization, and that the social relations of poor relief were considerably more complex than any model can easily account for.¹²

David Rothman's argument that the first third of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a commitment to institutional solutions for social problems such as poverty and insanity has been greatly modified by scholars such as Gary Nash, Stephen Ross and Robert Cray, who have described communities experimenting with poorhouses as early as the 1680s.¹³ Historians have realized for some time that "the image of poor and dependent populations rarely has coincided with their actual demography and that clients have used institutions and organizations for their own purposes, shaping them sometimes in ways quite at variance with the intentions of their sponsors."¹⁴ But few attempts have been made to closely examine the disjunction between images of the poor in popular print and administrative reports, and their actual demography. Historians and sociologists have often overlooked the place of the almshouse in the community and its vital role in the local economic and social structure in favor of examining the role of poor relief in local political struggles, particularly in urban areas such as Philadelphia.

Historical analyses of the institutionalized poor have been shaped both by the assumptions of contemporaries and by problematic sources. Most studies of the institutionalized poor have been too narrow either in focus or in sources: studies of particular institutions, or relying heavily on printed reports covering regions or states.¹⁵ Many studies of single institutions have been too dependent on the abundance of anecdotal evidence, which tends to emphasize the unusual inmates, while studies of poor relief using primarily quantitative analysis have frequently been influenced by reporting biases inherent in the records.

Studies which focus on urban poverty are not helpful in understanding the very different nature of non-urban poor relief, and studies focused on single institutions can be too much shaped by local issues affecting that institution's administration to be helpful in understanding the experience of the poor more generally. Neither of these types of study shed light on the experience of poverty in a region. To add depth and nuance to our views of antebellum institutions, we must understand the limits of available data and information on relief recipients and expenditures, particularly in official reports. Second, distinctions between rural and urban relief can be clarified, and the variables

within communities affecting relief (such as local political debates and the economic interactions between individual institutions and their neighbors) be more fully understood, by studying institutions on a regional basis. Surviving institution records are usually very patchy, and it is necessary to include a number of them in order to examine the experience of poverty in a region. What is necessary are regional analyses to explore the connection not just between the poor and relief administrators, but between communities as they struggled to adapt to economic change and monitor the complex lives of the increasingly mobile lower classes.

Institution Records as Sources and as Texts

Most institutional records were open to periodic inspection, by Overseers of the Poor, by the Visitors' Committees, and by investigative committees, should the institutions be suspected of wrongdoing or poor management. Since the memberships of Overseers and the composition of Visitors' committees changed relatively frequently, over time a sizeable proportion of a community's adult male population would have occasion to examine these records. Because these records were not intended to be read by the general public, they were less likely to have been drastically distorted by omissions than the published reports that were intended to convince a broader public audience of institutions' efficacy.

Annual reports and visitors' reports were public documents, intended to demonstrate the effective and appropriate use of public funds, and these publications were sources of information for administrators' public statements. Administrators did not hesitate to make use of the opportunity to affect the public's view of the poor. Rothman suggested in *The Discovery of the Asylum* that administrators of poorhouses, asylums, and prisons all found it useful to manipulate the books so as to present the most favorable account of institutions' rehabilitative success, which could include adjusting both admission and discharge and financial information.¹⁶ For this reason alone these reports present insurmountable problems as evidence for a comprehensive examination of either institutions or of their inmates.

Most problematic for the historian is that sources for institutions' published reports are not always clear; when they are identified the source was usually quarterly reports of inmates, which grouped the inmates according to

factors such as sex and race rather than tracking individuals, and were therefore blind both to monthly variation in population caused by short stays in institutions, and to the distortion caused by repeatedly counting individuals who stayed in the institution for longer periods. The annual reports to state legislatures or other government bodies are also not trustworthy as sources for statistics, because they are based on extracts from the institution's admission and discharge records and on an annual census (by definition only a snapshot of current inmates) taken at roughly the same time every year, usually the first week in January. Annual reports purported to include all inmates in the year preceding, but counted inmates only at fixed intervals (probably monthly), with the result that admission and discharge records reveal paupers that do not appear in either annual or quarterly reports. Consulting these reports will lead the historian to overestimate the proportion of long-term and disabled inmates, because these reports include the same inmates from year to year and miss the inmates' periods outside the institutions during any one year.

Because published sources cannot be reliable reflections of institutional function, and their use for quantitative purposes is especially problematic, careful examination of the institutions' daily records is necessary in order to develop a reasonably accurate picture of institutional life and of the institutionalized poor. Admission and discharge records provide a daily record of the inmate population, which helps to counter biases in records such as annual reports both by providing more information about the population (individually and in the aggregate), and by allowing clearer determination of particular characteristics such as origin and length of stay. Visitors' reports, stewards' books, financial records, transcripts of paupers' interviews when applying for relief, and administrators' correspondence with inmate families and each other are also rich anecdotal sources for illuminating the relationships between inmates, administrators, and communities. These sources offer compelling narratives of individual and familial hardship, and negotiations over authority within institutions and communities; the narratives are couched in language which offers glimpses into the expectations for institutions held by administrators, inmates, and local citizens. It is vital, then, that historians be more aware of the vagaries of almshouse record keeping, and that we bring both statistical *and* anecdotal evidence to bear on questions about the lives of the poor in the nineteenth century, so that we can make most effective use of records' strengths and be appropriately aware of their weaknesses.

Economic Upheaval and Trends in Poor Relief in the Mid-Atlantic Region

In the early nineteenth century, Philadelphia's economic focus shifted from commerce to manufacturing as the city's status as a port for foreign trade declined in comparison with New York. Residents of the city's outlying counties, and the working poor in particular, struggled to adjust to this fundamental reorientation of the region's economy. Philadelphia's manufacturing expansion in the period between 1840 and the beginning of the Civil War depended in part on the growth of a market in the outlying counties for manufactured goods. In the satellite counties, household manufacture declined after 1815 as manufactured goods from Philadelphia became more available, and both industrial manufacture and agricultural specialization increased dramatically. Commercial agriculture increased in the region's western counties (Chester, Bucks, Lancaster, and York, for example), and in particular the production of wheat and livestock. Much of the commercial agricultural production occurred on a small scale, as individual households experimented with production for local and regional sale of cloth, thread, and dairy products. The construction and expansion of canals and railroads in the 1820s and 1830s opened up the anthracite coal fields, promoted the intensification of iron production, and improved transportation for all goods.¹⁷

The region's economy suffered depressions after the War of 1812 and in the early 1840s. The population of Philadelphia grew rapidly, as rates of outmigration to the city from the outlying counties accelerated from 1800 to 1840. Economic instability created difficult conditions for the working poor. The population of Philadelphia's satellite counties increased in the 1840s and (more sharply) in the 1850s, and with it the number of unskilled laborers. The population increase was due mostly to an increase in the birthrate and a decrease in outmigration to the city, rather than to foreign-born immigrants from Philadelphia.¹⁸ The majority of relief applicants in the outlying counties were migrants born in the Philadelphia region. In these economic transformations and demographic shifts, all that was required to push much of the poor population into destitution was a working family member's illness or injury, an unexpected pregnancy, or a poor harvest.¹⁹

Most historians have agreed that the first half of the nineteenth century saw significant increases in the proportion of the overall population relieved. Standard accounts of poverty in urban areas such as Philadelphia and New

York City find that this period of social redefinition and economic change included increased general hostility toward the poor, as well as widespread attempts to control the poor more effectively through institutionalization and through limitations on the relief that could be received outside institution walls. Regardless of the institution's location, outdoor relief was most vulnerable to fluctuations in local opinion and political squabbles over relief administration, because those receiving it were the most difficult to supervise.²⁰

Changes in relief policy emerged from social and economic transformation, reflected changes in the economic and social stability of the general population, and promoted demographic shifts in the population receiving relief. Boston, New York and Philadelphia each established city almshouses by the mid-eighteenth century, citing their inability to effectively assist growing numbers of the poor, especially immigrants. While historians have not explicitly described a model for the process of institutionalization, Stephen Ross and others have clearly connected the decision to adopt institutional solutions for social problems, to the presence of variables like population pressure, dissent over the collection and spending of taxes, and periodic epidemics.²¹ In rural New York in the mid-eighteenth century, and Philadelphia's satellite counties some forty years later, communities experimented with boarding out the poor in local homes and in rented buildings, and justified the move to a poorhouse system primarily on the basis of fiscal efficiency and more effective delivery of assistance to the needy. In some communities this including shifting from a "boarding out" system to a poorhouse, and back again.²²

Philadelphia's outlying counties had begun making the transition to an institution- and county- based relief system in the early 1790s (New Castle County, Delaware, established their first county poorhouse in 1792). In several counties the advisability of a poorhouse and its location were matters of considerable local disagreement; local tradition holds that the state's investigation of the Bucks County almshouse in 1819 was actually rooted in the bitter disputes over the institution's location. In contrast to late-twentieth-century "not in my back yard" responses to new institutions, non-urban antebellum communities were reasonably welcoming to the poorhouses, recognizing them as sources of supply contracts, goods, and services.

By the 1820s, most of Philadelphia's satellite counties had discarded outdoor relief and various community-based boarding arrangements as the primary way of caring for the poor and had adopted an institution- and

county-based system of poor relief. Philadelphia's Overseers of the Poor struggled in the 1820s with providing more cost-efficient relief and improving supervision of relief recipients, and non-urban relief officials grappled with similar issues, though their solutions were implemented on a smaller scale. In the older counties such as Lancaster and Chester, these institutions had already been operating for some twenty years, and experienced the growing pains of the communities in which they were located. The outlying county poorhouses were deeply imbedded in the social and economic lives of their communities, and officials maintained a local orientation in economic questions as well as in political matters. County poorhouses served as employers of many of the working poor who would otherwise be inmates, maintained close relationships with local farmers and businessmen who supplied the institutions' needs, purchased surplus produce and manufactured items from the overseers, and carried on a brisk business in arranging and supervising the indentures of relief applicants. These poorhouses therefore responded to, and reflected, changes in the political and economic environment in their local communities. This explains why the trends evident in relief administration and in the demographic profile of the institutionalized poor visible in Philadelphia are not present in the outlying counties.

The active role that overseers of the poor took in the labor market in the outlying counties may have been partially responsible for the lower growth rate of the population relieved as compared to Philadelphia and to the general population: many supplicants avoided admission to the almshouse by taking jobs in the area found for them by the overseers, and it seems certain that the work provided by the institution helped keep many of the working poor solvent enough to avoid applying for relief.²³ Some of the working poor traveled from non-urban areas to Philadelphia, where they joined the city's population of working poor. Some returned or were removed to their counties of origin by Philadelphia's Overseers of the Poor; others disappeared from the historical record.

Relief and its Recipients in Philadelphia's Satellite Counties

Who were the people who entered the almshouse in Philadelphia's outlying counties? Administrators and taxpayers in Philadelphia's outlying counties expected that those supported within the almshouse walls *should* be those whose families could not support them in times of need: "the aged and sick

the decrepit and unfortunate poor of our county who might by misfortune disease or accident become unable to support themselves."²⁴ This mandate was widely interpreted by the public to mean that the bulk of the almshouse population should be the very old or very young, children for whom apprenticeships had not yet been found, those who were sick or physically defective, and men of working age who had been injured. During times when the almshouse was under attack either for overspending or as part of larger local political disagreements, advocates of reforms such as the abolition of outdoor relief generally suggested that the most numerous residents of the region's poorhouses were unwed mothers, and able-bodied men and women who were either too lazy to work or were inebriates.²⁵ The institutions' defenders asserted that the poorhouses did serve their intended clientele in spite of the occasional abuse of the system by an "undeserving" pauper.

In urban areas in New York and Pennsylvania in the early nineteenth century, more frequent reporting of unemployment as a cause for seeking relief, increasing numbers of able-bodied adults on relief rolls, and decreases in average length of stay when institutionalized, all reflected the instability of the labor market and increasingly draconian relief policies. In New York state overall, especially during the period 1820–1860, the proportion of the general population receiving relief increased, particularly among adults who sought that aid for short periods due to illness or unemployment; men increasingly received short-term aid for unemployment. Women during this same period came to comprise an increasing proportion of both total relief recipients and able-bodied relief recipients. At the same time, average length of stay in the state's almshouses declined. Earlier in this period the elderly, the disabled, and children accounted for more than half of all relief recipients, but by the late 1850s, "almost three-quarters" of all recipients "could be classified as able-bodied adults; and the average recipient remained on the rolls for only eight weeks."²⁶

In Philadelphia, the only Pennsylvania location for which extensive statistical analysis has been attempted, the population relieved in the early- and mid-nineteenth century displayed similar patterns. The majority of almshouse inmates were white adults, and at least two-thirds were ill. Blacks were a minority of the inmate population; yet blacks and the foreign-born were over-represented in the institution in relation to their proportion of the city's population, and their numbers grew as the century advanced. Early in the century women slightly outnumbered men; but the proportion of male inmates increased in the period 1800–1854 from 38 percent to 59 percent. Men continued to be a minority of all public-relief recipients, however,

because women were the primary recipients of outdoor relief.²⁷ White women dominated the outdoor relief rolls, as officials tended to grant black women relief-in-kind before cash relief, and to force men into the almshouse.²⁸ After 1828, when new legislation restructured the city's welfare bureaucracy, a new and larger almshouse was constructed and an attempt was made to abolish outdoor relief altogether. The language of moral reform signaled a new and essentially punitive attitude on the part of guardians and managers toward the poor. The new harsher attitudes affected admission policies and therefore the inmate population. In addition to the changes already mentioned, fewer paupers were admitted to the institution, average length of stay decreased, and more paupers absconded from the institution rather than being discharged with leave to go.

Only slightly more than one-third of notations on individual recipients in admission records gave a reason for admission; for this reason, and because these records were intended for internal use only, it seems safe to regard the assessments as generally accurate rather than dictated by the need to establish institutions as serving only the legitimately needy. It is important to recognize that this part of the admission process was the most "mediated" of any, because that one-or-two word classification was shaped by the applicant's testimony; by the acceptance of an overseer if that applicant had applied to an Overseer or Trustee of the Poor for an order for admission to the institution or an order granting outdoor relief; and by the judgement of the Clerk recording the admission. The cooperative nature of this process is precisely why it is likely to be relatively reliable: overseers often went to considerable trouble to verify the details of applicants' testimonies in regard to more objective details such as employment or residency, so it seems unlikely that they would take the word of an applicant about illness with no attempt to evaluate that justification; indeed, the ignorance of individual overseers and clerks about medicine may be one reason why disease identification in institution records is so difficult for historians attempting to use them.²⁹

The factors associated with relief recipients generally may be divided into physical problems, and social or economic problems (TABLE 1). Of the aid recipients whose cases the clerk felt were noteworthy enough to add information, the largest proportion (some 90 percent) were there for reasons generally advanced by administrators as appropriate: physical or mental illness, trauma, or debility. People driven to relief authorities by economic or social factors totaled almost twenty-nine percent of aid recipients whose record included additional information. Only about 10 percent of aid

recipients were connected to conditions that could conceivably be regarded as the result of "moral failures" (intemperance, venereal disease, pregnancy).³⁰ These numbers suggest that in fact the social welfare system in Philadelphia's satellite counties was serving exactly the people for whom it was intended, despite the reports of administrators and the fears of critics.

In Philadelphia's hinterlands, social welfare was more often widely used as a resource by individuals and families in (presumably temporary) difficulties than by seasonal occupants or long-term layabouts, as critics often charged.³¹ Poorhouse admission and discharge data show no strong association between length of stay and other variables, such as age or physical condition.³² While the "problem" groups expected to occupy the almshouse (the aged, the very young, the mentally or physically handicapped, pregnant women) did constitute a large part of the inmate population, they were not a majority of the region's institutionalized poor. The reality was that the institutionalized poor were a diverse group: a cross-section not just of their local communities, but of a growing *regional* population of highly-mobile "working poor," whose members moved between a few neighboring counties in search of work or relief.³³ In Philadelphia's outlying counties, where the administrators of the county poorhouses were in frequent contact with one another, and where the working poor routinely traveled between counties in search of work, many paupers were well-known to the house stewards.

The inmate population of the satellite counties' poorhouses was, however, very different than that of Philadelphia's. Even the largest of the outlying institutions held less than half the number of inmates of Philadelphia's almshouse; but the most important differences were demographic, and due to the differences between a rural and an urban environment. The sizes of the regional almshouses had very little to do with the demography of the inmate population. In spite of the variation between the outlying institutions in population sizes, there are no significant differences in age or sex ratios or racial composition between the inmates of Bucks and Lancaster Counties (average inmate population at least 150) and those of the much smaller Hunterdon County (average inmate population less than fifty). The almshouse populations in this study fluctuated from year to year according to local economic conditions without showing a statistically significant increase over time, though the absolute numbers of inmates did rise somewhat; these populations did not show any of the trends outlined above for Philadelphia, with the exception of an increase in the number of institutionalized African Americans.³⁴

The experience of non-urban African Americans in relief institutions was more similar to the plight of their urban counterparts than were the experiences of white non-urban poorhouse inmates to the white urban poor. African Americans were over-represented in the almshouse population in Pennsylvania's non-urban institutions, just as they were in Philadelphia.³⁵ The absolute number of African Americans in the almshouse population increased in the outlying counties in the first half of the century, just as they did in Philadelphia's almshouse. The proportion of institutionalized blacks may also have been increasing due to their increasing presence in the region's unskilled workforce (TABLE 2).³⁶ Demographic studies of black population in the region estimate the percentage of whites in the population in general to be approximately ninety-five percent.³⁷ Whites accounted for eighty-five percent of paupers recorded in admission records and annual reports.³⁸

Racial differences were also evident in paupers' admission to institutions: insanity and poverty were the most frequently cited conditions associated with admission for blacks, followed by pregnancy. White inmates with causes listed were most likely to have their need attributed to poverty, followed by insanity and general illness.³⁹ Blacks were also more likely than whites to be admitted in connection with either old age or youth.⁴⁰ For physical problems experienced by both black and white inmates, the proportion of afflicted black inmates was either about the same or greater than the proportion of white inmates.⁴¹ However some problem descriptions seem to have been applied only to white inmates, including: unemployment, stroke, pleurisy, and nerves.

It is possible that the attribution of unemployment and nerves to whites only suggests racial bias of the most obvious sort (that is, an assumption that blacks were less likely to be looking for work, and less sensitive to nervous disorders); it may also suggest a recognition that unemployment was such a common problem for unskilled African Americans in the area that there was no need to note it especially. The absence of black inmates with head pain, pleurisy, and scrofula is less easily explained. The prominence of poverty as a reason for seeking relief for all racial groups needs no explanation. The frequent attribution of insanity is at least in part due to the very broad range of mental conditions (some of them temporary, as "derangement" often was) subsumed by administrators under the term 'insanity'.

The largest class of inmates throughout the first half of the nineteenth century were white males, while women dominated the outdoor relief rolls.⁴² The gender imbalance appears likely to have been primarily the result of a combination of administrative policy, which tended to hold that poor men

were more likely to be in need of the reforming influence of institutional life than women; and social custom, which tended to target poor women as pitiable because they were by definition less competent than poor men, and therefore more likely candidates for both outdoor relief and private organization assistance.⁴³ Nearly half of the total population of inmates, and most of the males, were between the ages of twenty and fifty, the range most likely to contain the greatest number of able-bodied inmates (FIGURE 1).⁴⁴ The single largest age class was thirty–thirty-four years old, representing an average of nine percent of inmates each year.

A larger proportion of men stayed for a shorter period of time than was the case for the female inmate population.⁴⁵ An overwhelming majority of those staying the shortest length of time (one week or less) were men. Women represented only eighteen percent of those staying a week or less, and most of these women were between the ages of thirty–thirty-five. The admission of the very young was most often dependent upon the admission and discharge of their parents or caregivers; small children constituted a liability, particularly for single women, which increased the likelihood that their caregivers would require support. As one might expect from the small number of women among those staying only briefly, children under the age of five were also a small proportion of those staying one week or less. The relatively high proportion of children among inmates staying between one and three months, the majority of whom were women (thirty-eight percent compared to thirty percent of men), suggests that there may have been a seasonal component in length of stay for women with children.

The relatively low proportion of children between the ages of ten and nineteen is presumably the result of their being bound out as part of the institution's regular operations. Only 27 of the 909 women entering the almshouses were admitted with more than one child; of these, about half were accompanied by husbands as well as by children.⁴⁶ Some, like Ann Bradley, followed their husbands into the institution who were incapable of supporting the family due to accident, illness, or unemployment. Husbands also followed their wives: Mary Nannum's husband James joined her two months after her entry into the Delaware County almshouse.⁴⁷

Three-quarters of the children recorded in the annual reports to the Court of Quarter Sessions for Chester County were apparently accompanied by a relative.⁴⁸ The presence in the almshouse of large numbers of children should not therefore be construed as evidence that the institutions functioned largely as homes for orphans or foundlings. This does not mean that there were no

orphans or foundlings; the clerks for all of the institutions in this study generally identified these children in their admission record, and sometimes included details of their abandonments or the death of their parents. For example, the infant Thomas Barn was so-named because he had been "found in James Ralston's barn" as a newborn.⁴⁹

When families can be traced through the admission and discharge records rather than annual or Visitors' reports, it appears that the binding out of one of the children was often the catalyst for the departure of the rest of the family. It is impossible, however, to establish what proportion of the inmates came in with other family members. Even though the majority of the children seem to have been accompanied by an adult, this does not mean that families stayed longer than individuals who entered alone, because some children remained in the institution after other family members had departed.⁵⁰

Age was a factor in poorhouse admission for both the very elderly and the very young. Aged folk might be forced to seek relief when they became too helpless to work, or if they became ill or deranged and could not be cared for at home by family members. The very young were taken into the poorhouse both as foundlings and as part of family groups. Extreme age or youth were especially slippery designations for aid recipients, in part because it is difficult to establish what meaning such terms had for nineteenth-century almshouse clerks responsible for the records from which the data is taken. Previous studies of Philadelphia homes for the aged suggest that terms like "old" had a broadly understood but non-specific meaning until the 1830s; age was employed throughout the century as an arbitrary criterion for admission to specialized homes for the elderly, apparently with no implication of physical infirmity. In the 1830s Mathew Carey highlighted the ongoing importance of productivity as a factor in this discussion, making an explicit distinction between the "superannuated" (and therefore useless) and the merely old in discussing their ability to support themselves; this same distinction appears in poorhouse admission records, a usage of these terms to which twentieth-century historians should be sensitive. Even the oldest and most virtuous recipients of charity were expected to work toward their own support (if physically capable) until well into the nineteenth century.⁵¹

Regardless of how specific ages are grouped into categories, neither the very young nor the very old seem to have been likely to remain in the institution for extended periods of time as a result of their age.⁵² Paupers who stayed for longer periods (more than four months) do appear to represent three clear groups: infants and small children, young adults, and the elderly,

but no correlation can be established between age and long-term residence in the poorhouse. Some of the paupers staying for longer periods did so not because of their age, but because of other physical or economic conditions; young adults were most likely to be in the latter categories.

Among those inmates who stayed more than six weeks and had a physical condition associated with their admission, many did suffer from the maladies one might expect to see associated with long-term dependency: twenty-two-year-old Franklin Whisler was consumptive, and John Birmingham, a twenty-nine-year-old black man, was blind. Many young adults between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five staying for longer periods did so because they were disabled or suffered from a chronic physical condition; Mildred Pyle, for example, first appeared on Chester County's relief rolls in 1807, when she received outdoor relief with her mother, Elizabeth Whitting. She was described as suffering from "fits." She entered the institution in 1813, and remained there until her death in 1822 at the approximate age of twenty-one. During this time she was variously described in the institution's annual reports as "sickly," having "fits" (this was the most frequent), and once as an "idiot."⁵³ Among those remaining the longest in the almshouse were the paupers who were crippled, insane, consumptive, "weak" or "feeble," or lame. Sore legs or other limbs, and general illness were also commonly noted. Daniel Bradley was crippled, a debilitating physical condition that was unlikely to improve. The descriptive labels accompanying their names appear year after year with little change in wording: Daniel O'Daniel ("has only one arm"), and Mildred Pyle ("fits"). With the obvious exception of pregnancy, there were no dramatic differences in the types of maladies connected to men and women.

Despite the claims of Chester County poorhouse administrators, the inmate population was not overall incapable of laboring due to poor physical health. Fewer than half of the inmates in this study had some cause for admission listed, and in many of these cases it is unclear whether the condition named was the reason for the admission.⁵⁴ Several of the "conditions" are not physical impairments but social and economic factors (poverty, unemployment) which the clerk deemed worthy of note and which impacted both on the paupers' admission, and on their classification and treatment in the almshouse. Many of the conditions (idiocy, old age, or deafness, for example) would not have precluded the paupers' useful employment within the institution, and those with non-crippling disorders were put to work wherever possible.⁵⁵ When only those conditions that would certainly have

prevented inmates from working are considered, the number of those readily identifiable as not able-bodied is even smaller.

While every poorhouse contained a number of the mildly deranged or mentally abnormal, described in a variety of ways including "simple," "idiot," deranged," "crazy," and "foolish," these folk were no more likely than other paupers with physical conditions to be inmates over long periods throughout the first half of the century. Joan Jensen asserted that the proportion of women inmates with mental problems in the Chester County almshouse increased steadily in the first half of the nineteenth century, and that by 1850 Chester County listed sixty-four percent of all women inmates as "deranged," "idiot," or "simple." This claim is not supported by quantitative analysis of the admission records; the assertion may have been based on a summing of the monthly reports of inmates in the house, which would have been likely to result in repeatedly counting inmates who stayed for long periods.⁵⁶ In general, the proportion of institutionalized women labeled insane was higher than the proportion of male inmates, but only slightly more than half of the insane were women.⁵⁷ This is less suggestive of a bias in diagnosis than it is that men were more likely to be in the institution for other reasons, including intemperance. While colorful paupers such as Bucks County's Bill Murray—who roamed the almshouse property and often wandered into town trailing the ball and chain intended to restrict his movements—must have been a highly noticeable part of the community, they never constituted a large proportion of the inmate population.⁵⁸

If the undeserving poor were not to be found among those receiving relief for shorter periods, neither were they a majority of long-term relief recipients. Less than twenty-five percent of those staying more than six weeks in any county were either described as old or noted as having a physical condition.⁵⁹ In Chester County, pregnant women were the largest component of the long-term inmates with conditions noted in 1830, 1840, and 1860; there is no suggestion of a trend over time.⁶⁰ Many women were admitted relatively early in their pregnancy (second trimester); it seems probable that most of these women were admitted not in order to give birth, but because their pregnancy had impaired their ability to support themselves.

When individuals appeared in relief records over long periods of time, they were seldom inmates for that entire period; most common was a pattern of relatively brief stays over a period of years. Many of those receiving relief over a number of years stayed in several almshouses. William McGinnes, who belonged to Chester County, spent time in the Philadelphia almshouse as

well, probably after going to the city to seek work. In 1829, he spent six days in the city almshouse; in 1833 he stayed there for six weeks and a day, receiving a shirt, "trowsers," and shoes.⁶¹ Elizabeth Francis Foy entered the Philadelphia almshouse in April 1847 at age fifty-eight. The clerk noted that she had been born in England, was married with five children, and belonged to Chester County. It was, he remarked, her sixth admission; her most recent discharge from the institution had been less than two weeks before. In 1848, Foy entered the Chester County almshouse; in that year she stayed in the almshouse twice, each time for periods of less than four months. She returned in 1849 and in 1850 for two stays of two months and seven months respectively.⁶² Almshouse stays were sometimes rather far apart. For instance, Mary Jane Heageman appeared in the Hunterdon County almshouse with one or more children in 1857, 1860, and 1863. Catharine Dolby first entered the Chester County almshouse in 1850 as an infant; she returned in 1860 as a young girl, and was bound out by the Trustees of the Poor.⁶³

Regardless of their background and characteristics, most paupers throughout the first half of the nineteenth century stayed in eastern Pennsylvania's county poorhouses for short periods of time: fifty percent stayed for four weeks or less, and thirty-five percent for two weeks or less. For all sample years, short stays (a month or less) dominated the distribution, and long stays were a small proportion of all stays (FIGURE 2). All counties show the same pattern of many short stays and far fewer longer residences. The proportion of those staying a month or less in all institutions combined increased from thirty-six percent in 1820 to seventy-three percent in 1860, with the most dramatic increase in the 1850s (FIGURE 3).⁶⁴ But the shape of the distribution of lengths of stay remained the same regardless of changes in the proportion of shorter stays, which suggests that the population relieved was growing rather than that there were significant differences in relief seekers.⁶⁵ Administrators and contemporary commentators often assumed that a significant portion of the paupers in the institution in the winter months came to spend the winter and would leave in the spring. However, there is not enough seasonal variation between either numbers of admissions or reasons for admission to suggest that this was true; paupers came for most of the same reasons regardless of season, and the increase in admissions every fall was not balanced by an emptying out of the institutions in the spring.⁶⁶

The increased proportion of inmates staying for shorter periods corresponds to Clement's findings for Philadelphia in this period. However, there is no compelling evidence that a large proportion of short-term aid recipients

in the outlying counties were able-bodied paupers, or that their primary reason for shorter stays at any time in the period of this study was unemployment. Only one-third of the stays of one month or less have any cause noted in connection with admission, and only three (0.29 percent) of the paupers included in the analysis came with any reference to lack of employment.⁶⁷ For most almshouse inmates, then, no specific reason can be established for their presence in the institution, which makes it unwise to generalize about a connection between any specific cause for admission and length of stay. The difficulty of establishing a meaningful statistical relationship between the length of paupers' residence in the poorhouse, and any other variable associated with admission, strongly suggests that paupers were making use of the institution in ways that suited their own particular needs, and as part of broader strategies for survival defined by their own specific situations and alternatives to applying for institutional aid. These strategies could include aid from private sources, from other institutions, from family members, and from neighbors.⁶⁸

While recidivist paupers and the chronically dependent were a matter of considerable concern to administrators, paupers who entered the almshouse more than once were probably a more *visible* rather than a more *numerous* segment of the population. They accounted for only fifteen percent of those admitted in the years studied.⁶⁹ In a casual reading of the reports and other administrative records, such people are notable precisely because they appear frequently. The institutions' "frequent customers" may have influenced contemporary commentators and later historians who used only anecdotal examination of almshouse populations to overestimate the disabled and chronically dependent poor.

Were almshouse inmates part of a larger "culture of poverty," members of a growing class of permanently indigent who would always be dependent on public charity? In spite of the loudly voiced concerns of social and political commentators and local welfare authorities, long-term residents were never a large proportion of the almshouse population at any time. The families who appear in almshouse records were part of a class of "working poor" who were likely at some point in their lives—possibly on several occasions—to require temporary assistance from public charity. The brevity of most stays suggests that a specific event or problem prompted them, and that inmates left when the problem was either resolved or compensated for in some other way. The short lengths of stay and the institutional records revealing paupers' influence over their stay in the poorhouse indicate the poor clearly understood that

their lives even when institutionalized were not entirely in the hands of the upper classes.

Administrators and Inmates

Relief policy in the Delaware Valley was shaped as much by local need as by political debates. The demographic characteristics of the population did change slightly over time, as the total population of the region grew; these changes do not, however, constitute a statistically significant trend. Similarly, variations in relationships over time between administrators and inmates did not worsen, as some historians have suggested. These variations are best described as cycles, wherein individual stewards or boards of overseers attempted to exert greater control over inmates as a result of either larger events like recessions, or local politics.

Administration in the outlying county poorhouses was certainly affected by changes in poor relief legislation in the first half of the nineteenth century. But the poorhouse records show a clear and consistent pattern of local resistance to legislative prescription and overseers' insistence on making relief decisions on an individual basis regardless of the rules. In Lancaster County, for example, the Board of Overseers of the Poor bowed to community pressure and the institution's difficult financial circumstances in announcing the abolition of outdoor relief in 1825. Expenditures for outdoor relief did not cease after the announcement, though they were at least initially reduced; rather, most of those on the outdoor relief rolls were "reclassified" as receiving temporary relief, which had not been forbidden.⁷⁰ Relief occurred within a larger political context including disagreements between groups or parties about how relief should be administered; but the most influential part of the relief process was the interaction between individual paupers or families and administrators.

Regardless of legislative prescription, evaluation of inmates' admission and matters affecting them in the institution were handled on a case-by-case basis, with the result that inmate treatment varied widely within institutions. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, administrators frequently made arrangements with inmates' families and friends to maintain the needy outside the institution, an indication both of the ongoing ties between institutions and community and evidence of administrators' recognition that institutional life was not necessarily the most effective way to aid

the poor. Relief arrangements as outlined in overseers' minutes clearly indicate that administrators expected less-than-complete control over relief recipients. When Abraham Sharpless and Moses Palmer agreed to "keep" John Sharp for a year at the "average rate" of support, the agreement specified both that the two men were "not to be paid for any time he [Sharp] may not live with them" (a funds-conservation measure on the part of the Trustees), and that "he is not considered as bound to stay nor they bound to force him to stay against his Will."⁷¹

Paupers within institution walls influenced administration and their own situations in simple and straightforward ways as well as in more subtle ones: appearing before the overseers to request favors such as clothing, or "liberty" to visit friends or family, or to complain about poor treatment or shortcomings in the institutional diet; and requesting wages for work performed, or the loan of raw materials with which to manufacture saleable items such as shoes, cloth, or butter.⁷² The links between institutions and their communities were both practically and morally close. Administrators monitored the assets of inmates and supplicants, and occasionally confiscated assets such as inheritances and pensions to pay for individual paupers' support. The same records documenting these often-complicated financial transactions, contain clear statements of administrators' larger sense of moral responsibility for their charges. Responsibility was sometimes a matter of conflict between administrators, as when Lancaster County's almshouse clerk, George Bomberger, was admonished by the Directors not to bring inmate Rebecca Ramsey "any sweetmeats, such as candies," because it was "an injury to her health."⁷³ The almshouse "family" was a community in a very real—though limited—sense, and administrators' use of the metaphor was clearly more than an optimistic choice of phrase.

Just as parents cannot completely control their children, administrators recognized that their control over poorhouse residents had both moral and practical limits: the almshouse did not isolate its inmates from the community, nor was it intended to, with the possible exception of the violent insane. Poorhouse boundaries were both figuratively and literally porous, as administrators pondered larger authority relationships while monitoring a constant stream of paupers and non-inmates into and out of the institution on errands, business transactions, and exchanges of goods and services. Some institution's rules and regulations explicitly recognized this by establishing guidelines for policing leaves from the poorhouse and penalties for late or drunken return.⁷⁴ Admission records and pauper testimonies outline the relationship between

administrators and inmates, the connections between institutions, and the participation of inmates in the operation of the institutions. Families outside the institutions kept in touch with members who were inmates, both asking for information about one another and transmitting news through the almshouse stewards. Family members visited their institutionalized relatives, and inmates went to visit their families outside. Inmates' families wrote directly to stewards to ask for information."⁷⁵ Inmates' families also enlisted the help of more substantial citizens to solicit information.⁷⁶

Despite administrative changes over time and differences in the size of county almshouses, the demography of almshouse populations was relatively stable across the region throughout the period of this study. The attitudes shaping the formulation of relief policy and its administration must therefore be seen as more than the result of either changes in ideas about the moral culpability of the poor, or increasing interest in cost-cutting, as historians of social welfare policy have often insisted they are. These attitudes were the product of constant negotiation and change, as the composition of local boards of overseers changed every few years and individual guardians negotiated individual cases with the paupers and with each other. The deployment of particular images of the poor was an important part of fitting relief practice to local custom, social, and political conditions, and to the population relieved.

The Visitors' reports for the Chester County almshouse reveal that the Trustees were in fact using the oft-expressed fear of the multiplication of the institutionalized poor—the procreation of the “monster”—to convince taxpayers of the need for immediate renovations to the building's residential structures, several of which were virtually uninhabitable. The Trustees had been calling for these renovations, to be funded with additional poor taxes, legislative appropriations, or private subscriptions, for some years. These improvements (which did not take place until 1855) were presented in the 1826 Visitors' report, and in subsequent ones, as necessary for the separation of the sexes and the promotion of decency within the institution. The renovations would also—not incidentally—have resulted in improvements to the basic structures, plumbing, ventilation, and cooking arrangements, and in creation of construction and supply contracts for local builders.⁷⁷ In the 1841 report describing the greater number of inmates as feeble and unable to work, Chester County's Visitors strongly urged the construction of new residential buildings by reminding readers that in the current buildings the crowding together of paupers “with very little regard to age, colour, or sex” impaired

the "order of the institution and the comfort of its feeble and affected inmates." At the same time, asserting that "no alteration of those [buildings] currently in use can render them suitable," the Visitors admonished that in addition to separating the ages and sexes more effectively, "the vicious and the vile should be prevented from mingling so freely with those who are well disposed and susceptible of contamination."⁷⁸

Yet the language of administration was frequently sentimental in tone, describing the inmates consistently as a "family" and speaking of the stewards and matrons as surrogate parents. An 1831 Visitors' report for the Chester County poorhouse praised the matron for the "industry, economy. . . care and kindness" exhibited in "the management of her numerous and afflicted, and exceedingly troublesome family;" they were "gratified. . . to say that the steward seems to feel and act toward the unfortunate Paupers as a wise and tender Father feels and acts toward his family."⁷⁹ This kind of language was not limited to administrators; when praising the second Delaware County almshouse as "a mighty monument to the generosity of the Directors," the *Delaware County American* took special note of the cooking facilities, which were "capable of accommodating three hundred in a family."⁸⁰

Administrators painted public images of the poor to serve institutions' needs or funding, for local support for legislative appropriations when the year's allocation for an institution was insufficient or for improvements, or for improving the success rate on collection of poor taxes. Administrators publicly advanced cynical images of the poor in general, while bending the rules within institutions to best respond to the needs of individual cases.

Conclusion

The social welfare system in the city's satellite counties was in many respects similar to the structure of relief in Philadelphia, New York, or Boston. Indeed, Philadelphia's outlying counties copied the city poorhouse rules and regulations, administrative structures, and some features of the physical structures. Yet the demographic trends found elsewhere by other historians, and for later in the century, are not present in the Philadelphia region in the first half of the nineteenth century. The inmates did tend to stay for shorter periods as the century advanced, but there is no evidence to support the assertion that this was because the population was increasingly composed of the able-bodied unemployed. The population of the almshouses outside

Philadelphia shows no sign of becoming increasingly composed of the aged, or of changing in any other (statistically significant) respects.

The differences between the non-urban institutions in this study were not statistically significant, regardless of great variation in the size of institutions and the composition of their inmates. What this suggests in part is that the differences between urban and non-urban institutions did in fact have to do with the size and composition of their populations: in poorhouses like Philadelphia's Bettering House where the inmate population was very large and contained a large proportion of strangers and immigrants, the bonds of community may in fact have been strained—such large numbers of needy people could not effectively be tracked and their accounts of themselves verified. This does not prove the converse—that before city institutions were large they were more active and involved parts of a community which broke down in the face of population growth and economic instability. But the starkness of the contrast underscores the importance of connecting institutions' functions to their physical and economic surroundings, and suggests that a careful examination of urban institutions in this period might reveal a more complex network of relationships between institutions and communities than supposed even by careful scholars such as Priscilla Clement.

This larger regional and quantitative view helps us to see the poor as their contemporaries could not, in part because it enables us to separate the institutions' actual inmates from the larger body of folk, many very poor, who daily moved in and out of the poorhouses conducting the business of life. Historians bring their assumptions to the process, but traditional assumptions about the effect of rural social change in the work of David Rothman, Douglas Lamar Jones, and others, err in suggesting that the poorhouse simply reflects economic change. Both qualitative and quantitative information on Philadelphia's satellite counties show that county poorhouses were integral, active parts of the economy, and much more complex institutions than the community-breakdown model suggests. Equally important, the social-control model of change cannot show us that daily life in and around these institutions was in large part a series of small negotiations between individuals with very different needs, goals, and abilities. There is no question that inmates were at a disadvantage in any disagreements or negotiations over authority; but they were not the only members of the community to negotiate with administrators over similar issues. To deny the poor agency in the process is to be both unjust and dull.

If historians are to build a new model for examining the place of the poorhouse in antebellum communities, that model must be based first on a clearer understanding of who populated the institutions, and second on a more comprehensive vision of the complex connections between the inmates and the institutions' employees, the institutions' overseers, and the taxpayers who supported them. We need to examine institutional life as a web of relationships within a larger web of social and economic relationships.

If we are to understand the place of institutions in solving social problems and responding to society's needs, it is crucial that we look more closely at the institutions of the past. Examining the place of poorhouses and other institutions in the social and economic lives of their communities can do far more than add detail to our picture of social welfare reform and administration. Such examination adds nuance to our understanding of the ways in which individual communities and regions adapted to economic upheaval in the early years of American industrialization, and struggled to adapt to social and economic change; it can also move us from a two-dimensional view of the poor to a vision both more flexible and less condescending.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Janet Golden, Susan Klepp, Laurie Rofini, Billy G. Smith, Janet Theophano, Janet Tighe, and Elizabeth Toon for reading earlier drafts of this essay. Special thanks are due to Thomas Valente, without whose statistical expertise this essay would not have been possible, and to Ruth Herndon for support far above and beyond the call of collegiality.
2. Visitors' Report, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, March 29, 1826, Chester County Archives, hereafter CCA. Visitors were specially-appointed members of the Board of Overseers of the Poor who visited the almshouse regularly, usually monthly. The Visitors were to make sure that the institutions and their inmates were clean and orderly, to examine financial accounts, and to hear complaints from paupers and the steward about either one another or general living conditions. Often they give an account of the number, sex, and race of the inmates. These reports were presented to the larger Board and either entered into or summarized in the minutes. Usually the Visitors' reports are very brief; occasionally, however, they include discussion of living conditions or building improvements.
3. Contrary to the Trustees' assertion, the reports and census suggest that the number of people helped (including outdoor relief) in the course of the year in 1822 was actually larger than in 1826, 605 as compared to 536; also, the number of people in the house at the time of the annual census was higher in 1826 than in 1822. The difference is not significant in statistical terms; it is important here as evidence that different considerations were behind this concern than those formally stated.
4. Visitors Report, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, 1841, CCA.

5. See Monique Bourque, "Virtue, Industry, and Independence: Almshouses and Labor in the Philadelphia Region, 1790-1860" (Ph.D. diss, University of Delaware, 1995).
6. While Daniel was a constant inmate from 1817 until his death from unspecified causes in 1830, Ann typifies the experience of most inmates in that she was there for short stays over longer periods of time. She several times left her children in the institution while she went out, presumably looking for work or employed on a short-term basis; See Annual Reports, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, 1813, 1814, 1829, 1830, 1833; Admission and Discharge Book, Chester County Poorhouse, November 13, 1826, August 30, 1829, October 25, 1829, April 23, 1830, March 17, 1831, and June 6, 1831, CCA.
7. Historians of poverty in America have written extensively about the division of the poor into "deserving" and "undeserving," and argued about the extent to which these moral judgements about relief applicants shaped their treatment within the relief system; See, for example, David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); Robert E. Cray, Jr., *Paupers and Poor Relief in New York City and its Rural Environs, 1700-1830* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); John K. Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). The concern itself was not new, and had been tremendously influential in shaping revisions to the English Poor Law in the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries; England adopted a workhouse system in the 1830s; See, for example, Anne Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).
8. For a discussion of this process in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, see Thane Bryant, "Economy and Humanity Happily United: The Almshouse in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 1790-1822," unpublished mss., 1989.
9. The database was created by coding in complete admission and discharge records for all available institutions at ten-year intervals between 1800 and 1860; random samples were created as necessary for specific tests. Of 2656 total cases, 147 received outdoor relief.
10. For fuller discussion of paupers' participation in relief process, see Monique Bourque, "Poor Relief 'Without Violating the Rights of Humanity': Almshouse Administration in the Philadelphia Region, 1790-1860," in Billy G. Smith, ed., *Down and Out in Early America* (Penn State Press, 2003).
11. A good example of the simplistic model of explaining the effect of late-eighteenth-century demographic changes on poor relief is Douglas Lamar Jones, "The Strolling Poor: Transiency in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 1975; For the same basic argument for a later period, see Glenn C. Altschuler and Jan M. Salzgeber, "Clearinghouse for Paupers: The Poorfarm of Seneca County, New York, 1830-1860," *Journal of Social History* 17:4 (1983). Rothman's *Discovery of the Asylum* is the basis for much of what has written according to, and about, the social control thesis.
12. See Stephen J. Ross, "'Objects of Charity': Poor Relief, Poverty, and the Rise of the Almshouse in Early Eighteenth-Century New York City," in William Pencak and Conrad Edick Wright, eds., *Authority and Resistance in Early New York* (New York: The New York Historical Society, 1988).
13. See Ross, "Objects of Charity"; Gary Nash, *Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1979); Cray, *Paupers and Poor Relief* and "Poverty and Poor Relief: New York City and its Rural Environs, 1700-1790", in Pencak and Wright, *Authority and Resistance*.

14. Michael B. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1981), 59.
15. For studies of individual institutions, see for example Priscilla Ferguson Clement, *Welfare and the Poor in the Nineteenth-Century City: Philadelphia, 1800-1854* (Associated University Presses, 1985); and "Nineteenth-Century Welfare Policy, Programs, and Poor Women: Philadelphia as a Case Study," *Feminist Studies* 18:1 (1992); Susan Grigg, *The Dependent Poor of Newburyport* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984); Altschuler and Salzgaber, "Clearinghouse for Paupers: the Poorfarm of Seneca County, New York, 1830-1860," For more statistically sophisticated analysis depending primarily on published reports, see for example Joan Underhill Hannon, "Poor Relief in Antebellum New York State: The Rise and Fall of the Poorhouse," *Explorations in Economic History* 22 (1985), and "Poverty in the Antebellum Northeast: The View from New York State's Poor Relief Rolls," *Journal of Economic History* 44 (1984). For clients' use of institutions in ways other than those intended by administrators, see Constance McGovern, "The Community, the Hospital, and the Working-Class Patient: the Multiple Uses of Asylum in Nineteenth-Century America," *Pennsylvania History* 54:1 (1987).
16. David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*.
17. For fuller discussion of the economic development of the region, see for example Diane Lindstrom, *Economic Development of the Philadelphia Region, 1810-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). For this development in larger context see Diane Lindstrom, "The Industrialization of the East, 1810-1860," *Working Papers from the Regional Economic History Center* 2:3 (1979), and Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860* (New York and London, W.W. Norton & Co., 1966); For women's participation in this region's household economy, the best sources are Joan Jensen, "Cloth, Butter, and Boarders: Household Production for the Market," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 12 (1980), and *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1986); and Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
18. I have not attempted a discussion of immigration as a factor in almshouse admission here because immigrants cannot be reliably identified in the admission and discharge records: while recent immigrants are often noted as such, terms like "Irish" and "German" were used by different clerks at different times to describe both immigrants and people of ethnic descent who were actually born in America, and it is often impossible to establish which usage is appropriate for a given individual. John Modell's analysis of population growth outside Philadelphia argues that fertility was negatively correlated with urbanization. It was lowest in the city and highest the furthest from the city. In general, fertility declined between 1820 and 1850, and increased after 1850. I have not attempted to measure fertility within the region's poorhouses, but it is interesting to note that the 1820s, a time of considerable published anxiety about the growing numbers of dependent poor, was a period in which the overall population was experiencing a decline in fertility. See Modell, "A Regional Approach to Urban Growth: The Philadelphia Region in the Early Nineteenth Century," paper presented to the Regional Economic History Conference, Wilmington, Del., 1971. I am grateful to Susan Klepp for drawing my attention to this study.

19. The literature on eighteenth-century and antebellum poverty in the Philadelphia region is abundant. The best studies for the city continue to be Billy G. Smith, *The Lower Sort: Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Clement. Much less is available on the outlying counties, but Lucy Simler's research on eighteenth-century Chester County is invaluable. Her most recent published work has focused on the discovery by historians of a growing class of landless, wage-dependent laborers in the county around the turn of the century; See for example "The Landless Worker: An Index of Economic and Social Change in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1750-1820," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 114: 2 (April 1990); Joan Jensen's *Loosening the Bonds* contains valuable discussion of poverty in some of the outlying counties.
20. Scholars have been unable to reach consensus on whether outdoor relief has contracted or expanded in times of economic crisis. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argued in *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Random House, 1971) that outdoor relief has historically been extended to more people during times of economic hardship as a means of reducing social turmoil. Leah Feder and Michael Katz have also advanced this view; see Michael Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* and *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); and Leah Feder, *Unemployment Relief in Periods of Depression* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1936). Priscilla Clement has argued on the contrary that, as Philadelphia's economy responded to the Panic of 1819 and to taxpayer dissatisfaction with growth in relief payments during the 1810s, outdoor relief was constricted in times of crisis and Philadelphians turned in these times to institutions as the primary relief-giving unit; See Clement, *Welfare and the Poor in the Nineteenth-Century City*. As John Alexander suggested in 1983, this disagreement is in large part based on time period. Historians making Piven and Cloward's argument have usually focused on the latter half of the nineteenth century and on the twentieth, rather than on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; See John K. Alexander, "The Functions of Public Welfare in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia: Regulating the Poor?" in Walter I. Trattner, ed., *Social Welfare or Social Control? Some Historical Reflections on Regulating the Poor* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983).
21. See Ross, "Objects of Charity"; Cray, *Paupers and Poor Relief*.
22. See Cray, *Paupers and Poor Relief*, especially chapter four, 100-102. I noted a similar pattern for Hunterdon County, New Jersey.
23. In both urban and rural areas, institutions hired the working poor to perform odd jobs around the grounds, and to perform some manufacturing-related tasks for and in the institution. For Philadelphia see, for example, Benjamin J. Klebaner, "Employment of Paupers at Philadelphia's Almshouse Before 1861," *Pennsylvania History* 24:1 (1957). In satellite counties, at least some administrators explicitly described this type of an arrangement as an alternative to relief; see Bourque, "Virtue, Industry, and Independence," chapter four.
24. Visitors' Report, Chester County Trustees of the Poor, 1826, CCA.
25. The surviving account of the examination of the Bucks County almshouse in 1819 by a state-appointed committee provides a rare opportunity to witness one such conflict. The institution's accounts, farming practices, relationships with neighbors, and treatment of inmates were all scrutinized, and the published record of the hearings includes statements from neighbors and employees,

- and testimonies from inmates. However compromised the accuracy of the accounts may have been in being recorded and published, they still provide some tantalizing hints about the assumptions brought to the relief process by both inmates and more substantial citizens. See *Minutes of the Almshouse Visitation: Containing the Charges Against the Directors and Steward of the Institution, As Laid Before the Visitors Appointed by the Court, and the Testimony of the Several Witnesses Examined in the Course of the Investigation* (Doylestown: Simon Siegfried, August, 1819).
26. See Joan Underhill Hannon, "Poor Relief Policy in Antebellum New York State: The Rise and Decline of the Poorhouse," *Explorations in Economic History* 22 (1985): 247. Her analysis is, however, based on secondary sources. Altschuler and Salzgeber's work on Seneca County makes similar assertions; see "Clearinghouse for Paupers."
 27. Clement, *Welfare and the Poor in the Nineteenth-Century City*, 110.
 28. See Clement, "Nineteenth-Century Welfare Policy, Programs, and Poor Women: Philadelphia as a Case Study."
 29. This statement is made with caution; the process of diagnosis and the identification of diseases in this time period is complex and dubious enough without considering the extent to which identification would have been affected by the expertise of the observer.
 30. It is important to remember that the connection between pregnancy and "sin" cannot reliably be made in these records, because many pregnant women were married when they entered these institutions.
 31. See for example Smith, *The "Lower Sort"*, especially Chapter Three.
 32. Regression analysis showed no relationship between either age or disabling physical condition and length of stay. The equation for age and stay was $STAY = 64.73157 + -8.265959E-02 \times AGE$; Pearson's r was -0.0219 and R-Square was 0.0005 . The equation for disabling physical conditions and stay was $PROPORTION = 0.6829146 + -3.085366E-04 \times YEAR$; Pearson's r was -0.0933 and R-Square was 0.0087 . An independent group t-test was employed to compare the proportion of disabled inmates in earlier years of the study (1810, 1820, 1830) with the proportion of disabled inmates in later years (1840, 1850, 1860), with results indicating no evidence of a trend toward a greater proportion of disabled inmates later in the century (calculated $t = 0.68$, $p = 0.513$).
 33. Directors' willingness to adopt an image of the poor (or at least of poor working-age men) as shiftless may have been at least partly the result of a recognition that the workforce was highly mobile, and of the existence of seasonal patterns in that mobility.
 34. The population did increase, but the increase did not constitute a statistically significant trend.
 35. This is in sharp contrast to the institutional population in the south, where racism may have played a greater role in admission than class, religious, or ethnic considerations. See for example Carole Haber and Brian Gratton, "Old Age, Public Welfare and Race: The Case of Charleston, South Carolina, 1800-1949," *Journal of Social History* 21:2 (1987).
 36. Carl D. Oblinger has argued that the proportion of blacks in the general population and among the impoverished was increasing in this period; See "Alms for Oblivion: The Making of a Black Underclass in Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1780-1860," in John E. Bodnar, ed., *The Ethnic Experience in Pennsylvania* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1973): 104. Oblinger's statistics are based on an analysis of Chester and Lancaster counties only. A comparison of 1810, 1830, and 1850, for which

- data was available for more than two counties, suggests that there were significant differences in the racial composition of the inmate populations between these years.
37. See for example Jean R. Soderlund, "Black Importation and Migration into Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1682-1810," in Susan E. Klepp, ed., *The Demographic History of the Philadelphia Region, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 133:2 (1989). Soderlund's analysis includes a number of the counties in this study: Bucks, Berks, Chester, Delaware, and Lancaster. Carl D. Oblinger has provided estimates for the period 1800-1860 for Chester and Lancaster counties in "Alms for Oblivion."
 38. This calculation derived from database containing all available admission and discharge records for all institutions in the study for 1810, 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850, and 1860, totaling 2656 cases (see note 9, above).
 39. Insanity and old age made up approximately the same (largest) proportion of African Americans who had a cause associated with their admission; pregnancy and youth followed and also made up about the same proportion of black inmates with causes listed.
 40. The proportions of blacks admitted for old age and for youth were 6.8 percent and 8.2 percent respectively, as compared to 2.3 percent and 4.6 percent for whites.
 41. It should be noted that the difference in regard to most of these conditions is not dramatic. The exceptions are old age, youth, and consumption.
 42. Of the 2656 relief applicants in this study, 1542 (fifty-eight percent) were white men. The next largest group was white women, 755 (twenty-eight percent). Black men outnumbered black women, though the margin of difference was much smaller (185 to 135, or seven percent to five percent). Although tests suggest some growth in proportion of African American inmates, white males remained by far the largest class of inmates throughout this period.
 43. The proportion of paupers with a condition connected to their admission in this age group was fifty-three percent (this would include all conditions, not just disabling ones). Of these paupers with a condition noted, forty-one percent were men. Age distribution in Figure 2 was created using mean for each age group. All counties and years were combined because one-way ANOVA using sample showed no significant differences between counties and years.
 44. This calculated from total inmate database. Actual percentage was 47.6.
 45. Of the 907 men for which information on length of stay is available, twenty-five percent stayed six days or less, fifty percent stayed twenty-three days or less and seventy-five percent stayed fifty-seven days or less. Of the 378 women for which this information is available, twenty-five percent stayed sixteen days or less, fifty percent stayed forty-five days or less and seventy-five percent stayed ninety-one days or less. Men so greatly outnumbered women in the general almshouse population, however, that direct comparison is difficult.
 46. This count is likely to be slightly low, as it is based on a survey of women and children with similar surnames; a few mothers entered with children who had different surnames. I encountered only two fathers who entered with children but apparently without female partners.
 47. Accounts With Other Almshouses, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, CCA. Mary Nannum stayed a total of ten weeks, and James remained for two and a half weeks.
 48. This cannot be regarded as a definitive figure; since the annual reports to the court summarized the year's admissions, it is at least possible that some children were not counted.

49. Annual Report, 1811, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, CCA.
50. Because of the difficulty of tracing and cross-referencing family groups, I did not attempt to establish whether children tended to stay longer than their parents.
51. See for example Carole Haber, "The Old Folks at Home: The Development of Institutionalized Care for the Aged in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 101:2 (1977); Billy G. Smith, "Poverty and Economic Marginality in Eighteenth-Century America," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 132:1 (1988): 101; Mathew Carey, *A Plea for the Poor, Particularly Females: An Inquiry How the Charges Alleged Against them of Improvidence, Idleness, and Dissipation are Founded in Truth* (Philadelphia: L.R. Bailey, 1838).
52. No statistically significant relationship can be established between these variables and length of stay. The ages of paupers staying less than four months fall into a relatively normal distribution, compared with the largest proportion of the population who were between the ages of twenty and fifty. However, suggestive changes appear in the age distribution of the inmates when the histograms are examined at different lengths of stay.
53. The cause of her death was not specified, but it is tempting to conclude that she suffered from a degenerative physical condition such as epilepsy, which could have impaired physical and eventually mental functioning, and finally killed her.
54. Of the 2656 applicants to six institutions in 1810, 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850, and 1860, only 968 had some physical condition associated with admission, including cases where it was unclear whether the condition was responsible for the admission. New Castle County, Delaware, for example, regularly admitted paupers with a reference either to extreme age or extreme youth.
55. It is difficult to establish which physical conditions would have been disabling in the sense of preventing individual paupers from supporting themselves. For the purposes of this discussion, disabling conditions have been defined as those which prevented the individual from being put to work in the institution and which would not have improved over time (those listed as crippled, insane, consumptive, lame, suffering from fits, or blind, for example).
56. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds*, 75.
57. 63 of 122.
58. *Minutes of the Almshouse Visitation*, 62-63.
59. In most counties for most years, the group staying more than six weeks constituted about a quarter of the population for that year. It should be noted that there is no correlation between either the presence of a condition and stay length, or with any specific condition and stay length.
60. I have never encountered evidence of a policy, written or unwritten, about the length of time for which women were considered entitled to assistance after giving birth. As with other inmates, length of stay was probably largely up to the individual.
61. Accounts With Other Poorhouses, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, December 12, 1832-December 29, 1832, and May (?), 1833, June 22, 1833, CCA.
62. Notations for Foy's stays in the Philadelphia almshouse appear in the Daily Occurrence Docket, Philadelphia Guardians of the Poor, Philadelphia City Archives (hereafter PCA). These records appear in the back of a volume of manufacturing inventories spanning 1845-1851. Notations for Foy's stays in the Chester County almshouse appear in the admission and discharge records, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, CCA. If only annual reports had been consulted, she would appear as a

- long-term inmate rather than a mobile one. While the number of her admissions was unusual, this movement between institutions was common.
63. For Heageman see Board of County Freeholders, Hunterdon/Mercer County, Inmate Records, 1846 – ca. 1869. Office of the Clerk, Township of Hopewell, Titusville, New Jersey. For Dolby see Admission and Discharge Records, Chester County Poorhouse, August 10, 1860, CCA.
 64. This trend is dependent largely on the data from Chester County, as this is the only county for which data on length of stay was available for 1860. Testing for variation in distribution between counties showed no significant differences between Bucks and Chester counties for 1830, and between Bucks and Lancaster counties in 1810, the data from the latter two counties was combined with that from Chester County for the purposes of analysis.
 65. New Castle County was the only exception to the pattern, including a larger proportion of stays between two and three months. Twenty-five percent stayed days or less, fifty percent stayed forty-four days or less, and seventy-five percent stayed seventy-six days or less. It is likely that this is a real difference rather than one caused by the sample, because the cases for that year (1860) number 359.
 66. Close analysis of the monthly variation in admissions would probably show the longer stays concentrated in the winter months; however, the analysis already performed on lengths of stay shows that most of those admitted at any time would not have stayed an entire season.
 67. The paucity of references to lack of employment does not seem likely to have been the result either of its universality as a problem, or of failure on the part of administrators to recognize unemployment as a problem which might appropriately be addressed by local government.
 68. See Merrill Smith, *Breaking the Bonds: Marital Discord in Pennsylvania, 1730-1830* (New York: New York University Press, 1991).
 69. "Visible" because more likely to be noted as returns since the clerk recognized them.
 70. See, for example, Minutes, Directors of the Poor and House of Employment, Lancaster County, January 5, 1821, and June, 1825, Lancaster County Historical Society. The ruling came after a prolonged period of financial difficulty for the institution, in which the Board borrowed money to meet necessary expenses, and the steward, physician, and clerk all voluntarily took reductions in their salaries. Before resorting to abolishing outdoor relief, the Board had also tried reducing the quarterly amounts paid to those on the outdoor relief rolls.
 71. Minutes, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, November 17, 1801, CCA. Of course, all parties also recognized that should Sharp leave the care of the two men (possibly relatives, possibly friends) for any considerable length of time, he risked forfeiting his outdoor support.
 72. Examples are numerous. Typical cases include Alexander Curry, who presented an address to the Board of Trustees of the Poor for New Castle County in 1798, complaining of ill-treatment by both the steward and the matron of the almshouse. See Minutes, Trustees of the Poor, New Castle County, Delaware State Archives. Paupers were among the witnesses called to testify in the state investigation of the Bucks County, Pennsylvania almshouse in 1810, where one pauper claimed that the food was "rather too little and not nutritive enough;" see *Minutes of the Almshouse Visitation*, 50-53. Institutions throughout the region routinely gave aid in the form of leather to be made into shoes for resale, cloth to be made into clothing either for the applicant's own use or for sale to support themselves, and on several occasions purchased cows for the use of widows in making butter to be sold for the widows' support.

POPULATING THE POORHOUSE

73. Bomberger's persistence in the practice led to harsh examination of his accounts by the Directors looking for padding or inappropriate expenditures. Bomberger's connection with the institution was severed shortly thereafter. See Minutes, Directors of the Poor, Lancaster County, February 3, 1841; April 5, 1845.
74. See, for example, the Ordinances for Lancaster County, which were copied into the Minutes of the Directors of the Poor, December 18, 1799.
75. John McCann's sister, Ann Brown, wrote to ask the Chester County poorhouse steward for news of her brother, "if he Stil lives and how his Helth is of Body and Mind." Complaining that she "wrote three times and received no answer," she added that she would come visit as soon as possible and that her "sad neglet" of her brother was not for lack of affection but rather because her family was "large and Helpless" (Directors' Letter Book, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, CCA. Letter dated December 11, 1860).
76. Lewis Papmore inquired after James Baldwin on behalf of Baldwin's father, who had heard a report that his son had fallen into a creek and drowned (Directors' Letter Book, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, CCA. Letter dated September 29, 1859).
77. Visitors' Report, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, March 29, 1826. Chester County Archives, hereafter CCA. The report noted in its recommendations the necessity of convincing the public of the need for such renovations, as "a law as well as funds are necessary to enable them to carry their desires into effect."
78. Visitors Report, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, 1841, CCA.
79. Visitors' Report, Trustees of the Poor, Chester County, 1831, CCA.
80. *Delaware County American*, April 15, 1857.

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